

LEADERSHIP IN ACTION

a briefing series for new england's educational leaders

What Are Learning Standards?

There has been a lot of national discussion recently about “learning standards.” Yet there has been significantly less discussion about what learning standards specifically are, what they are not, how they actually work in schools, or why they even matter.

In brief, learning standards are concise, clearly articulated descriptions of what students should know and be able to do at a specific stage of their educational journey. For example, here is a fifth-grade reading standard taken from the [Common Core State Standards](#), which have been adopted by 45 states: *Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative language such as metaphors and similes.* And here is a high school writing standard: *Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to the task, purpose, and audience.*

To varying degrees, educators have been using standards to guide lesson designs and instruction for years. But simply ensuring standards are *taught by teachers* is only the first step—**the next step is to make sure they are being learned by students.**

What You Need to Know

- ✓ **Standards are not a prepackaged curriculum or course of study**—although this is a common misperception. Standards are a fundamental set of academic, intellectual, and skill expectations for students, but it's school boards, administrators, and teachers who decide how they get taught. Learning standards such as “determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative language such as metaphors and similes” do not tell teachers what texts to assign, how to teach students about metaphors or similes, or even how to determine they have achieved the expected standard. Learning goals are consistent and common, but teaching remains a local decision.
- ✓ **Standards draw a line in the sand.** In effect, standards stipulate that students must learn a particular selection of critical skills and concepts before they can be considered prepared for the next step in their education. Teachers can teach students more, even far more, but not less. In other words, standards establish a common baseline for what it means to be an educated person in the United States, regardless of where students live, what school they attend, or how advantaged or disadvantaged their families are. And the stronger the standards the more students will learn.
- ✓ **Without some form of standards, we end up with no standards**—or, at best, widely uneven and unevenly applied standards. Without a common set of learning standards, we have no consistent or comparable way of determining what is being taught in our schools or gauging how well our teachers and students are doing. Before the Common Core State Standards were created, all 50 states had different learning standards. And before states developed standards, there was almost no consistency in learning expectations throughout the country.
- ✓ **Standards facilitate greater collaboration and innovation.** With common standards, teachers can share the lessons they develop, the instructional strategies they use, and the learning materials they create. In fact, there are now several national online exchanges have been launched that allow teachers share their best lessons, ideas, and teaching materials. Common standards also make it easier and less expensive to develop textbooks, learning software, and other educational resources. Standards do not stifle teacher creativity—in fact, they can give rise to even greater innovation through the power of collaboration, sharing, and collective thinking.

Want to Learn More?

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